



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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16 June 2005

**EGY100090.E**

Egypt: Domestic violence; whether there is state protection for the victims; existence of women's groups, shelters, or hot-lines (January 2003-June 2005)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

### Current Situation

Several sources concurred on the severe nature of domestic violence in Egypt (HRW Dec. 2004; AFROL n.d.a; Freedom House 23 Aug. 2004; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). Although the Egyptian government does not keep detailed statistics on violence against women, and as at the end of 2004 the last survey on the issue had been in 1995, many sources reported that approximately one third of married Egyptian women suffered from domestic violence (AI 5 Mar. 2004; HRW Dec. 2004; Measure (DHS) Nov. 2004; AFROL n.d.a; Women's Enews 26 Feb. 2004). A 2003 survey conducted by the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Affairs estimated that two thirds of urban women and 30 per cent of rural women had been victims of domestic violence (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). Human Rights Watch (HRW) believes that perpetrators of violence against women and girls are often left unpunished by Egyptian authorities (13 Jan. 2005). The Women's Human Rights net, a Website founded in 1997 with the aim of providing women's rights information in English, French, and Spanish (WHRnet n.d.), revealed that a three-month survey found that domestic violence accounted for 28 per cent of visits by women to trauma units in Alexandria (ibid. Apr. 2003). The magazine *Obesity, Fitness & Wellness* cited a survey conducted by Measure Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) that found that infant and child mortality rates were higher for abused women in Egypt than for women who were not abused (*Obesity, Fitness & Wellness Week* 9 Oct. 2004).

Several sources also pointed to the continuing high prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt (*Gulf News* 9 Apr. 2005; AFROL n.d.a; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5), although the Egyptian government has been attempting to eliminate this practice (ibid.).

Some sources also acknowledged the existence of domestic violence perpetrated against men (*Gulf News* 12 Aug. 2003; *Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent* 1-7 Feb. 2004). One study found that approximately 20 per cent of women abused their husbands in one form or another (*Gulf News* 12 Aug. 2003).

### Society

The African News Agency (AFROL) has indicated that neighbours and extended family members are the people who generally intervene in some cases of domestic violence (n.d.a), but abuse is rarely discussed openly (AFROL n.d.a; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5; WOMANKIND Worldwide 2003), and fewer than half of victims actually seek help (ibid.). Sexual violence perpetrated by husbands or relatives is also a highly taboo subject in Egypt (AFP 14 May 2003).

According to data obtained from the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey administered by the National Population Center in 1995, 86 per cent of Egyptian women surveyed agreed that domestic violence was acceptable in certain situations (HRW Dec. 2004, 13). Another study found that 80 per cent of woman surveyed in rural Egypt agreed that beatings were "often justified, particularly if the woman refused to have sex with her partner" (AFROL n.d.b). In the words of HRW, "[s]ocietal and cultural restraints, a lack of information, and the fear of being impoverished with no support systems also made enduring abuse the more practical choice" (Dec. 2004, 43).

### Legislation

While some forms of domestic violence are criminal acts in Egypt (*The Herald* 8 Apr. 2005; Women's Enews 26 Feb. 2004), *Country Reports 2004* mentioned that there is no law against spousal abuse as such, but only general provisions relating to assault (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5).

According to HRW, the Egyptian Criminal Code "does not effectively deter or punish domestic violence" (13 Jan. 2005). The human rights organization further states that Egyptian law "sanctions" domestic violence because section 60 of the Criminal Code stipulates "'the provisions of the penal code shall not apply to any deed committed in good faith, pursuant to a right determined by virtue of the *Shari'a* '" (Dec. 2004, 13). Citing an article that appeared in the book *Domestic Violence: Global Responses* in 2000, HRW indicates that "in good faith" includes

circumstances in which "the beating is not severe," "the beating is not directed at the face," and "the beating is not aimed at the vulnerable 'fatal blow areas'" (Dec. 2004, 13-14). In addition, Freedom House claims that there is no law in Egypt that prohibits marital rape (23 Aug. 2004; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5).

HRW claims that Egyptian victims of domestic violence also lack access to any concrete mechanism that might legally help them avoid further violence (Dec. 2004, 43).

HRW has also criticized Egypt's divorce laws, which it believes discriminate against women by making it very difficult for women to obtain a divorce, and thus further discourage them from seeking assistance and protection from the authorities (Dec. 2004, 42-43). For instance, according to *Country Reports 2004*, a victim of spousal abuse must produce eyewitnesses to the crimes in order to obtain a divorce (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). On the other hand, an article by Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLURL) stated that a 15 December 2002 Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that women would subsequently have "an equal right of divorce" (2 Dec. 2004). Moreover, in March 2005, the Secretary General of the National Council for Women indicated that the personal status law had been amended to allow women to obtain a divorce even if they cannot prove that they were victims of harm (UN).

According to Agence France-Presse, courts can sentence women for up to two years for marital infidelity, while the maximum sentence for men is six months (14 May 2003). However, no corroboration of this statement could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within time constraints.

### **Judiciary**

An article appearing in *Al-Ahram Weekly* stated that only family courts dealt with domestic violence, whereas other courts "pa[id] little attention to family disputes, with the result that a case is frequently postponed and may be transferred from one court to another" (10-16 Mar. 2005). The Glasgow newspaper *The Herald* (8 Apr. 2005) and Women's Enews (26 Feb. 2004) mentioned that the penalties for perpetrators of domestic violence were often minimal.

HRW interviewed one young woman who had allegedly endured verbal and physical abuse from her husband for 11 years; she claimed she could not seek assistance without being accompanied by her husband and that she had been rebuffed when she went to court to obtain information on divorce procedures (Dec. 2004, 44). HRW claims that victims of domestic violence can face the rejection of their divorce request simply for not having the proper documentation, such as a marriage contract; in fact, HRW felt that women without such documentation "[had] little hope of terminating their marriages" (Dec. 2004, 44).

### **Police**

In a study published in December 2004, HRW found that some authorities, such as police, who should be able to provide assistance to women who are victims of violence, were unaware of the existence of government shelters (47). HRW has also criticized police in Egypt for being "routinely unsympathetic to the concerns of battered women and girls" (13 Jan. 2005).

### **Government**

The Office of the National Ombudsman for Women is in charge of assisting women who are victims of domestic violence (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). In a statement to the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women, the Secretary General of the National Council for Women of Egypt indicated that the Ombudsman's Office had established three toll-free hotlines and hired lawyers to assist women in cases of abuse, including domestic violence (UN 2 Mar. 2005).

While *Country Reports 2004* indicated that the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs ran more than 150 family counselling bureaus across the country (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5), according to HRW, the Egyptian government's program to shelter victims of violence is "inadequate": at the end of 2004, the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs operated four separate shelters, in Cairo, Alexandria, Dahiliya, and Ben al-Sawaf (Dec. 2004, 46). The maximum stay is three months, with possible extensions in exceptional circumstances (HRW Dec. 2004, 47).

HRW has also raised questions about the effectiveness of the shelters set up by the Egyptian government to protect women victims of domestic violence (Dec. 2004, 46). For example, in order to stay in a shelter, a woman must be younger than 50, divorced or widowed, and be "experiencing some familial difficulties," unmarried victims being ineligible (Dec. 2004, 46). Furthermore, the shelter sends social workers to homes of alleged victims in order to verify their situation, thus potentially jeopardizing their safety (HRW Dec. 2004, 48). According to HRW, "[s]helter staff sometimes refuse to admit women brought in by the police, and see their mandate as one of reconciliation rather than the provision of refuge" (Dec. 2004, 48). The Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs has been known to invite abusive husbands themselves to the shelters in order to bring couples back together (HRW Dec. 2004, 48).

Furthermore, an "overwhelming majority" of Egyptian women interviewed by HRW were not aware of the existence of these shelters (HRW Dec. 2004, 43). This, coupled with the societal taboo for women against living outside their marital home, has caused the four government shelters to remain "fairly empty" (ibid., 47). Though

the shelters are each supposed to accommodate 50 women, HRW found 10 women staying at the Cairo shelter when it visited in July 2004 (ibid., 47).

HRW alleges that the Egyptian government fails to enforce court rulings that oblige divorced husbands to pay alimony, child support, or marital property, which causes many women to put up with domestic violence because they fear the potential destitution that could await them upon divorcing their husbands (Dec. 2004, 45).

In the summer of 2004, the Ministry of Health raided the El Nadim Center for Psychological Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, later indicating it might close the non-governmental organization (*The New York Times* 15 July 2004; HRW 14 July 2004; PANA 6 Oct. 2004). *The New York Times*, which described the centre as Egypt's "only medical center dedicated to helping survivors of police torture, rape and domestic violence" pointed to the centre's work in exposing police abuse as a possible reason for its threatened closure (15 July 2004).

While Egypt has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), albeit with reservations, as at the end of 2004 it had not signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention (AI 2005; see also WHRnet Apr. 2003).

### **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

Several NGOs are in operation throughout Egypt offering counselling, legal aid, and other services to women who suffer from domestic abuse (AFROL n.d.a; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). The New Woman Research Center (NWRC) was founded with the mandate of raising public awareness on women's rights, FGM, and domestic violence (HRW 21 June 2003; *Al-Ahram Weekly* 10-24 Dec. 2003). The Centre for Women's Rights in Egypt provides legal aid for women victims of violence (WOMANKIND Worldwide 2003). The Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance has several ongoing projects to come to the assistance of women who endure violence, including a 16-month project, ending in 2005, to study the phenomenon of domestic violence and possible legal solutions (2004).

In 2004, AI set up a workshop in Cairo to raise awareness about media and violence against women throughout the Middle East and North Africa (AI 5 Mar. 2004). In February 2004, an amateur female theatre group organized a performance of *The Vagina Monologues* at the American University in Cairo (Women's Enews 26 Feb. 2004). The play's goal was to increase awareness of domestic violence, and it raised US\$1,200 for what Women's Enews calls "the first nongovernmental women's shelter in Egypt, which is expected to open in Cairo within a year" (ibid.). However, the play was not advertised and was kept confidential with invitations sent through foreign embassies and private e-mail networks (ibid.).

For a listing of NGOs operating in Egypt, please consult the attached document from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (PeaceWomen.org n.d.).

### **Further Information**

For further information on domestic violence in Egypt from the perspective of HRW, please consult *Divorced from Justice: Women's Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt* available at <<http://hrw.org/reports/2004/egypt1204/egypt1204.pdf>>. A critique of this report, entitled "*Divorced from Justice?*," was published by Al-Ahram and can be read at <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2004/721/fe1.htm>>.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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#### Additional Sources Consulted

**Internet Sites, including:** Al Bawaba, Al Jazeera, Alliance for Arab Women, Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), Arabic News, BBC, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), *The Economist* , European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Government of Egypt: Ministry of Health and Population, Ministry of Social Affairs and Insurance.

#### Attachment

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (PeaceWomen.org). n.d. "Egypt."  
<[http://www.peacewomen.org/contacts/africa/egypt/egy\\_index.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/contacts/africa/egypt/egy_index.html)> [Accessed 15 June 2005]

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